

Diploma in Criminology

Unit 1 Introduction

Introduction to Criminology

The term criminology is difficult to define because any definition depends on the background of the person defining it. In broad terms it is

... knowledge concerning the etiology, prevention, control and treatment of crime and delinquency. This includes the measurement and detection of crime, legislation and practice of criminal law, as well as the law enforcement, judicial and correctional systems.

For some, criminology could also be called *criminal justice theory*, while those coming from specific academic disciplines look at it differently and focus on the theories and methods of their specific discipline. The most common definition of criminology comes to us from *sociology*. We can gather the importance (and dominance) of sociology within criminology from the preface of Williams and McShane's (2004) popular text, *Criminological Theory*:

While there are other approaches to the study of crime, since the 1920s criminology has been oriented toward sociology. There are, however, some comments on biological and psychological theories of crime . . .

This unit will take a broader definition that encompasses more than the view of one specific discipline. The basis of all criminology, regardless of discipline, is the use of a systematic way of thinking. Systematic thinking occurred long before modern sociology, and those early thinkers thought about crime. This means that some very early thinkers (e.g. Aristotle, Plato, Cicero) must be taken into account if a complete picture is to be drawn.

For the purposes of this course, criminology will be defined as:

The study of various ways of systematically thinking about the description, prediction, explanation and control of crime.

What is Theory?

The single most important aspect of criminology is *theory*. In its most general sense, a theory is an explanation of a relationship between two or more things. In this sense, theories are vital to us; we use them every day in order to function. If a person notices that a burner on a stove is glowing a dull red and warns someone else not to touch it because it is hot, that person has expressed a theory. This is a very simple theory that expresses a relationship between high heat and the burner giving off light. Of course, theories can be much more complex than this example. The number and types of relationships the theory specifies determine the complexity of a theory.

Many students regard “theory” as something cooked up by professors to make life miserable. This is not the case. In fact, human beings require theories to live.

Life would be dangerous indeed if people had to touch glowing stove burners every time to determine that they are hot. We operate using theories all the time without even thinking of them as theories. People in our society accept the theory that cold-water taps are on the right, that other drivers will stop at stop signs, and that doors enable us to enter buildings. Daily life would slowly stop if we couldn't make these *generalisations*. It is the nature of humanity to generalise. Another way, then, of looking at theory is as a special type of generalisation.

A problem that arises out of the natural tendency of people to generalise is the tendency of **overgeneralisation**. This process is the basis for many social problems in our society. People commonly treat others unfairly because of overgeneralisations. The less people know about something, the more they are likely to overgeneralise. Not all professors are absent-minded. Not all men like to watch football. Overgeneralisations like these are easy to spot; most people will have encountered at least a few men who do not watch football and conclude that the generalisation is unfair. Not as obviously unfair and potentially more harmful are overgeneralisations made about people of other races, religions, and national origins.

A common distinction between types of theories uses the terms abstract and concrete. A **concrete theory** is one that explains observable, verifiable facts, such as in the hot stove example. Humans can observe the red light, and can use measuring tools, such as a thermometer, to identify precisely the amount of heat present. **Abstract theories** are not directly verifiable because they involve concepts

that researchers cannot directly measure. Humans use abstract concepts all the time. Things like joy, sadness and love cannot be seen, but most people accept that they are there. Researchers cannot directly measure ideas such as justice, integrity and love. Theories that involve such concepts are said to be abstract.

Common Sense Theory v. Scientific Theory

Our day-to-day theories are mostly based on “common sense.” The critical element here is the term *common*. History teaches us that just because knowledge is *common* to many people does not mean that it is true. At one time it was believed that the earth was flat and was the centre of the universe. People once believed that surgeons could cure illnesses by “bleeding” the patient, often accomplished by using leeches. Happily, these widely held beliefs are not a matter of common sense anymore.

What beliefs are commonly held today that are untrue? The problem is that we have no way of knowing—except for systematic inquiry. To our modern way of thinking, systematic inquiry is generally either philosophical or scientific. This text follows the modern trend in criminal justice research and concentrates on the scientific method.

Fred Kerlinger (1992, pp. 4-7) describes five important differences between common sense theory and scientific theory:

1. “Common sense” theory is developed based on “conceptual schemes” that may be “fanciful” and not subject to evaluation. Scientific theory is based on evidence that can be observed and measured.
2. Scientists verify their theories in ways believed to be objective. People often validate common sense theories by selecting examples that fit the theory. They maintain their stereotypes by ignoring examples that do not fit.
3. Control is important in science. In this context, control refers to the efforts of scientists to rule out other explanations for a phenomenon that their theory does not take into account. For example, a non-scientist who believes that children become delinquent because of drugs will not likely consider delinquency in children who do not use drugs.
4. The non-scientist is likely to seize on a chance occurrence and immediately develop a cause and effect theory to explain a relationship that is not there. A “lucky shirt” is an example of this sort of unscientific logic.
5. Scientists, unlike most non-scientists (and philosophers) rule out “metaphysical explanations” for events. Metaphysical explanations are explanations for something that cannot be tested, which usually means that the proposed cause cannot be observed. If someone proposes that serial

killers kill because they are possessed by demons, then they have offered a metaphysical explanation.

This last statement is often controversial because it is misunderstood. While it is true that scientists reject metaphysical arguments as unscientific, it does not mean that they do not agree with them or think them to be untrue—all the scientists are saying is that they cannot or do not know how to test it. If a scientist cannot test a theory by observation, it is not a scientific theory.

The basic idea of science is to establish a method of knowing things that is independent of people's opinions about them. This is why scientists do not attempt to answer many important questions, such as "what is justice?" The question is no doubt important, but it is not a question that science can answer. People trying to answer this question can never entirely separate it from their personal opinions and beliefs, so it is more properly answered within philosophy or theology (religion).

Kerlinger also distinguishes the method of science from other methods of knowing by describing three methods of knowing that are not scientific. The first is the *method of tenacity*. This is where people hold to their beliefs simply because they believe them to be true. The second method of knowing is the *method of authority*. This is where people believe what they believe because an important authority (e.g. the Bible, the surgeon general, a professor) said so. This method is not necessarily unsound and is used by scientists all the time. It becomes unsound (from a scientific perspective) when there is no willingness to question the authority. Think about where we would be today if Einstein had blindly accepted the work of Newton as absolute fact and never questioned it. The third alternative to the scientific method is the *method of intuition*.

By this method, people believe what they believe because it "stands to reason." This is essentially the method of the philosopher and explains why there is no general agreement among philosophers on important philosophical questions. Well meaning, honest people can consider a problem in a perfectly rational way and still reach different conclusions. When scientists disagree about theory, the arguments usually centre on the lack of evidence, the quality of evidence, or the interpretation of evidence.

By this point, it should be obvious that the term theory means something different to scientists than it does to the average person. Scientific theory is usually based on evidence, unlike the unsupported speculation of non-scientists. It is important to note that, while scientific theories are generally based on facts, scientists seldom regard a theory as "proven." Scientists are too conservative to use the word *proven* because there might be an exception to the rule that they have yet to find. The

strongest commitment that can be found is scientific writing will be something along the lines of a particular theory being “strongly supported by the evidence.”

What is Crime?

A major issue in criminological theory is the tremendous range of human behaviours that can be regarded as criminal. It must be remembered that a **crime** is simply a behaviour that persons in power chose to prohibit or command. For this reason, individual criminal acts may have very little in common.

The common thread of being illegal does not mean that the behaviours are alike in any other meaningful sense. This is why an increasing number of criminologists advocate limiting criminological theories to specific acts or a range of closely related acts.

What Makes a Good Theory?

Since the scientific method has dominated modern criminology, it is generally accepted among criminologists that good theory must be empirically testable and that evidence gathered from research supports the theory. This requirement is obvious from a scientific standpoint because empirical validation is the foundation of scientific inquiry. Williams and McShane (2004, p. 4) suggest that there is essentially no difference between what is a good theory in the social sciences and what is a good theory in the natural sciences (e.g., physics and chemistry). The primary difference comes in how variables of interest are measured. Generally, the more concrete a concept is, the more accurately and precisely it can be measured. Things such as temperature and velocity (important variables in the natural sciences) can be measured with a high degree of precision. Abstract concepts, such as depression or socio-economic status, are far more difficult to measure. For this reason, measurement is a difficult issue for social scientists.

One approach to alleviating the problem of not knowing the quality of social scientific measurements has been to use several different ways to measure an abstract construct. Scientists may use several *indicators* to try and measure a single concept.

Take socio-economic status for example. A scientist may use income, job security, property values and so forth to establish a subject’s socio-economic status.

The measurement and testing approach suggest a type of research known as **quantitative** research. *Quantitative* comes from the same root as the term *quantity* and is talking about numbers. A different approach is **qualitative** evaluation. The term qualitative suggests an interest in the quality of the theory. Qualitative research

focuses on the substance of a theory. The first of the qualitative requirements of a good theory is that it be logical. A logical theory is one in which concepts are clearly stated and propositions are rationally related.

Several authors have suggested that the scope of a theory is important. For a theory to be good, it should explain a wide range of behaviour (Akers, 2000). This requirement is controversial, as previously discussed under the heading of ***What Is Crime?*** The basic counter argument is that crime is a meaningless descriptor because it is so broad. Thus, any general theory of crime is suspect.

Another common requirement of a scientific theory is that it be **parsimonious**. The law of parsimony is the logical principle that theorists propose no more causes than are necessary to account for the observed facts.

The single worst criterion for a good theory is simply popularity. Just as with clothing and hairstyles, different theories enjoy a high degree of popularity at different times.

Just because a theory is enjoying “a lot of press” does not mean that it has any more validity than less written about theories.

Classification of Theories

There are many criminological theories that have been developed over the years. Without some way to organise them, it is impossible to study them. Simply put, theories must be grouped in some way before they can be systematically studied. Various authors have chosen different ways of organising theories. Akers (2000), for example, discusses a simple scheme where theories are divided into two groups: The first group consists of theories of making and enforcing criminal law, and the second group consists of theories that attempt to explain why people break the law. As Akers points out, there are many more theories of the second type.

One way to look at the problem is to use the terms **classical** and **positive**. Classical criminology describes theories that focus on legal statutes, the workings of government and human rights. Classical criminological theory is generally not considered scientific. Positive criminology, on the other hand, refers to efforts at making criminology scientific; that is, positivists use the scientific method.

One common way to divide theories into groups is to consider how abstract a theory is. The most abstract theories generally fall into a category called **macro theories**. Macro theories are most often concerned with social structures and the effects of those structures on human behaviour.

Macro theories most often consider society as a whole and give little concern to the individual. Examples of macro theory in criminology are anomie/strain theories and conflict theories. **Micro theories**, on the other hand, are generally more concrete. These theories try to explain how individual people come to commit crimes. The focus may be on small groups of people, such as gangs, or the individual. Most macro theories can be described as *epidemiological*. **Epidemiology** in this sense does not refer to the branch of medical science that deals with epidemics. In criminology, it means that the theory is concerned with overall crime rates. This is in contrast to **etiology**, which is concerned with the explanation of criminal behaviour in the individual or small group level. Thus, micro theories can be called *etiological*.

Activity 1

Take a look through your local paper. Is there one particular crime that appears to be rife in your area?

What is it?

What other types of crimes have been committed in the past week in your area?

Diploma in Criminology

Unit 2 Criminal Statistics

Criminal Statistics

It is essential when studying criminology to be aware of the latest trends in criminal statistics and you should keep up to date with these trends on a regular basis.

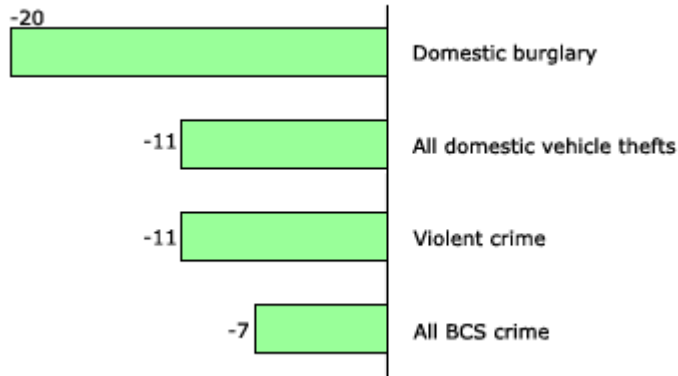
The latest criminal statistics for the UK are as follows:

The term BCS stands for British Crime Survey.

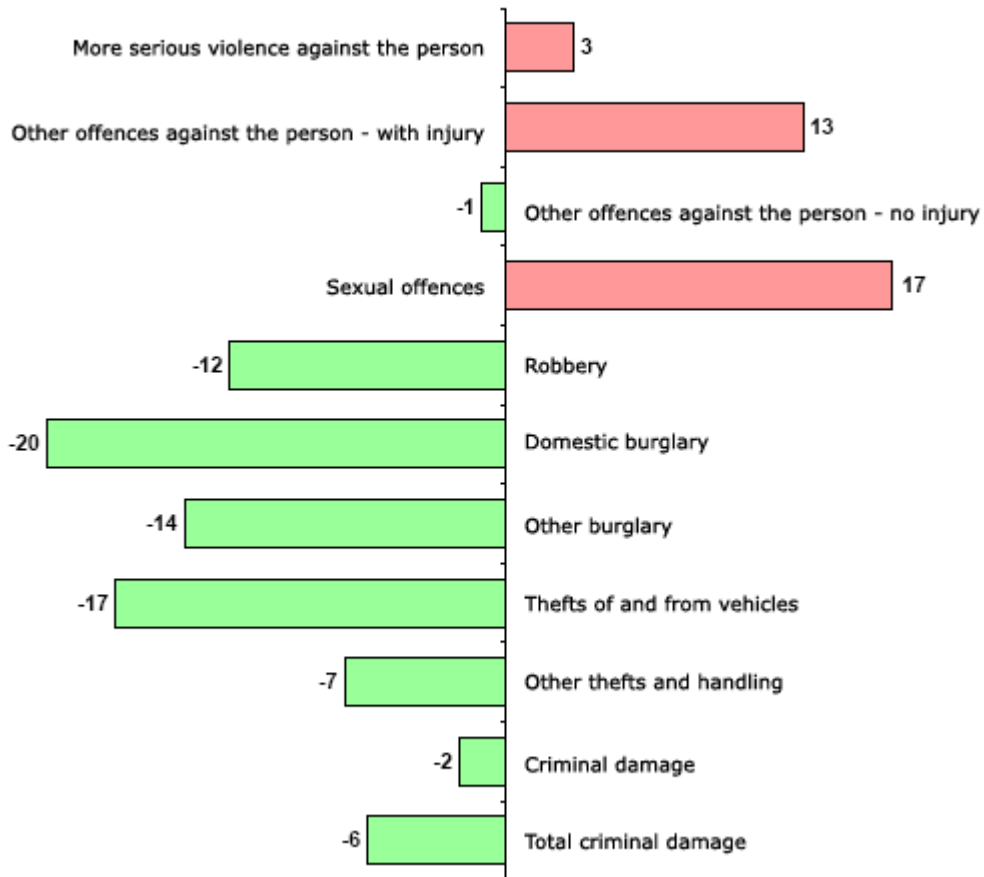
Extent & trends

- Since peaking in 1995, BCS crime has fallen by 44%, representing 8.5 million fewer crimes, with vehicle crime and burglary falling by over a half (both by 57%) and violent crime falling by 43% during this period.
- Violent crime has decreased by 11% according to BCS interviews in 2004/05 compared with 2003/04. Recorded crime statistics show a 7% increase in violent crime in 2004/05 compared with 2003/04, although this increase is partly due to the continuing effect of recording changes.
- The risk of becoming a victim of crime has fallen from 40% in 1995 to 24% according to BCS interviews in 2004/05, representing almost six million fewer victims. This is the lowest level recorded since the BCS began in 1981.
- According to the BCS, the proportion of people believing that crime has increased over the past two years, both in their local area (42%) and in the country as a whole (61%), has fallen compared with the previous year.
- Levels of worry about car crime have fallen compared with the previous year, levels of worry about burglary and violent crime have now stabilised after recent falls.
- The overall level of perceived anti-social behaviour has remained stable over the last year. One in six people currently perceive a high level of disorder in their local area (17%).
- The 2004/05 BCS shows that confidence in the CJS has improved in all areas (where a trend is possible) compared with the previous year.

Percentage changes in the main crime types according to BCS interviews in 2004/05 compared with 2003/04



Percentage changes in recorded crime, 2003/04 to 2004/05



Reporting and recording crime

- There are differences in the number of crimes that are recorded by the police and the number that are measured by the BCS but, in recent periods, they have differed by increasing amounts. Comparisons between them suggest that the increases seen in recorded crime continue to result largely from changes in recording practice. Although recording rule changes were introduced in all police forces in April 2002, it appears that ongoing auditing and improvements are continuing to cause further inflation in the recording of crimes.
- The estimated recording rate of comparable reported offences increased from 74% in the year ending September 2003 to 75% for the year ending September 2004. Police recording of crime is at the highest rate on record and between a quarter and a third higher than in 1981, when the introduction of the British Crime Survey first made this comparison possible.
- The proportion of reported comparable violent crime that was recorded by the police continued to rise from 62% in the year to September 2003 to 67% in the year to September 2004, up from 36% in 1999.
- The public's reporting of crime varies considerably by type of offence. Thefts of vehicles are most likely to be reported (95%), followed by burglaries in which something was stolen (77%). Reporting rates are relatively low for crimes such as common assault, theft from the person and vandalism (34%, 32% and 32% in 2004/05).

Property crime

- Both the BCS and police recorded crime show a fall in the number of burglaries between 2003/04 and 2004/05. Domestic burglaries measured by the BCS fell by 20%. Police recorded domestic burglaries also fell by 20%, and non-domestic burglaries by 14%.
- The fall in vehicle-related thefts since the mid 1990s has continued in the most recent period. A fall of 11% was measured by the BCS and 17% by police recorded crime between 2003/04 and 2004/05.
- Criminal damage remained stable between 2003/04 and 2004/05 as measured by the BCS. The police recorded a 2% fall in criminal damage between 2003/04 and 2004/05.
- The risk of being a victim of either burglary or vehicle-related theft has halved since 1995 and is much reduced for other property crimes.
- For both burglary and vehicle-related crime, having security measures in place was strongly associated with lower levels of victimisation. For example, while 83% of all homes had window locks in 2004/05, this was the case in only 36% of homes where a burglar got into the property.

Violent crime

- Violent crime as measured by the BCS has fallen by 43% since a peak in 1995, an estimated 1.8 million fewer incidents.
- 46% of all violent incidents reported to the BCS did not result in any injury to the victim. At least 48% of all police recorded violence against the person involved no injury in 2004/05.
- Young men, aged 16 to 24, were most at risk of being a victim of violent crime - 14.6% experienced a violent crime of some sort in the year prior to their BCS interview in 2004/05.
- There were 1,184,702 violent crimes recorded by the police in 2004/05, an increase of 7% since 2003/04. Part of this increase is likely to be due to the continuing impact of changes in recording and more proactive policing to counter violence problems.
- Police recorded robbery fell by 12% between 2003/04 and 2004/05.
- The number of homicides and recorded firearm offences increased in 2004/05, by 1% and 6% respectively.

Detection of crime

- There were just over 1.4 million detected crimes in 2004/05. Some other crimes may have had a suspect identified, but not met the definition of detected crime. The number of recorded detections in 2004/05 was up by 2% on 2003/04 figures.
- The detection rate in 2004/05 increased by three percentage points to 26%.
- The proportion of recorded crimes that were detected through an offender being charged or summoned, cautioned, having an offence taken into consideration, receiving a fixed penalty notice or a formal warning for cannabis possession ('sanction' detections), was 21%; 5% of crimes detected were 'administrative', that is no further action was taken. The relative weight of sanction and administrative detections varied widely by force.
- There was an increase in the proportion of crimes resulting in a sanction detection between 2003/04 and 2004/05, equivalent to a two percentage point increase in the sanction detection rate.

Activity 2

Basing your knowledge on your local area, which particular crimes seem to be on the increase?

Using information from your local paper, are the criminals involved being detected?

ACPD ASSIGNMENT ONE FOR UNITS 1 & 2	
TASK 1	How would you define crime?
TASK 2	Write an overview about the area you live in pinpointing the crime problems you can see.
TASK 3	What is required, in your opinion, to make your community safer?

If you would like this assignment to be marked and to have feedback on your work, please send your answers to your ACPD tutor. Details on how to send in work can be found in the Start Book that came with this course.

If you are working towards the ASET Diploma, it is important that you take your time and answer the questions fully. The mark you get for this work will count towards your final assessment.

Please remember that there is no obligation to submit work for marking if you would prefer not to.